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ABSTRACT

After-school programs that provide additional learning opportunities for children are seen as potentially powerful opportunities to improve student learning and facilitate other positive youth outcomes. This digest summarizes a research synthesis conducted by the Regional Educational Laboratory at SERVE. The synthesis summarizes research and evaluations conducted on a variety of after-school programs in order to shed light on the overall status of research on after-school programs. (GCP)

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by
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A Review of Research on Participant Outcomes in After-School Programs: Implications for School Counselors

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2003
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Introduction

After-school programs that provide additional learning opportunities for children are seen as potentially powerful opportunities to improve student learning and facilitate other positive youth outcomes (Miller, 2001). Recognition of the potential benefits of after-school programs has been the catalyst for tremendous increases in funding for such programs over the past decade. Significant funds have been invested in after-school initiatives at the local, state, regional, and federal level. As a result, considerable attention has been given to the need for studies to document outcomes associated with after-school programs to justify the program expenditures (National Institute on Out-of-School Time, 2000). A recently released study by Mathematica (U.S. Department of Education, 2003) suggested that outcomes associated with the 21st Century Community Learning Centers after-school program might be limited. This digest summarizes a research synthesis conducted by the Regional Educational Laboratory at SERVE (McComb & Scott-Little, 2003). The synthesis summarizes research and evaluations conducted on a variety of after-school programs in order to shed light on the overall status of research on after-school programs.

Methodology

Following a process outlined by Cooper (1998), an extensive search was conducted to identify impact evaluations of after-school programs. A wide variety of key words were used, including: after school, 21st Century Community Learning Centers, instructional support, homework, and tutoring. These terms were combined with key words such as outcomes, evaluation, and results. Databases searched included ERIC, PsycINFO, Dissertation Abstracts International, and SSCI. An extensive search was conducted on the World Wide Web. Links to sites were followed and searched thoroughly. The initial search process yielded a total of 75 articles, reports, conference presentations, and dissertations disseminated between January 1997 and April 2002. Documents that failed to provide a description of a specific program or initiative and documents that did not report on student outcome data were eliminated. A total of 27 documents were judged to meet the criteria for being included in the synthesis. The full report on the synthesis is entitled *After-school Programs: Evaluations and Outcomes* (McComb & Scott-Little, 2003) and is available at www.serve.org/ELO/research.html. See the reference list for a complete listing of studies included in the synthesis.

Children Served in the Programs

The programs examined in this synthesis served primarily children from limited-income families who were typically enrolled in elementary and middle school. Five of the programs served only children in elementary grades; 11 served children from elementary and middle school; and three served children in only middle school. Only one study examined a program serving high school students, while three reported results from programs serving children in elementary, middle, and high school. Children enrolled in these programs can be characterized as young, from limited-income families, and at risk for some type of negative outcome.

Program Descriptions

The synthesis included a total of 27 reports from research conducted on after-school programs. The programs ranged in size, setting, and intensity. The smallest program served seven high school students classified as juvenile delinquents. The largest program served 97,000 children. The programs were relatively evenly split between school-based and community-based settings. With the exception of two programs that served both urban and rural areas, all of the programs were based in urban areas.

The nature of services varied greatly from program to program. Children attended the programs an average of 13.33 hours per week, with the shortest program offering one and one-half hours of service per week and the most intense program offering services 20 hours per week during the school year and 30 hours per week during the summer. Although activities offered for children ranged from recreational activities to enrichment and cultural arts activities, the most common activity was homework help or tutoring. All of the programs that provided descriptions of their services provided help with homework or tutoring except one. One after-school program provided only tutoring services.

Findings

The overarching research question for this study was "What outcomes are associated with participation in after-school programs?" Findings suggest that after-school programs are associated with positive student outcomes, particularly in the area of psychosocial and youth development. Studies looking at social and emotional outcomes tended to use the most rigorous designs, such as random assignment and control groups. These studies also provided the most consistent evidence for program outcomes. Participation in after-school programs was associated with outcomes such as positive attitudes toward school, lower incidence of aggressive and other risky behaviors, and pro-social attitudes. Two studies looking at psychosocial outcomes reported no effects.

Results from studies looking at impact on academic outcomes provide mixed results. Several studies found that students participating in after-school programs exhibited

positive academic outcomes, such as more regular attendance in school and better grades. Evidence from studies looking at outcomes on standardized measures of student achievement is less conclusive. Several studies do report that participants in after-school programs score higher on measures of reading and math skills, although a few studies found effects for math but not reading and vice versa.

The most striking pattern seems to be the interaction between student characteristics and scores on standardized tests. A number of studies report effects were greater for children with limited proficiency in English and for children who were in the lowest group of achievers at the beginning of the program. A second and more consistent finding related to student characteristics is that students who attend after-school programs more regularly and for longer periods of time seem to benefit the most. In all cases where data was examined by the "dosage" a student received of the program, results favored students who had participated in more of the program.

Results from this research literature provide insights but are not conclusive. The studies varied in the design used, with a number using research designs that did not lend themselves to causal conclusions. Furthermore, the studies provided sparse information about actual program features, so inferences could not be drawn about which program features might be related to specific outcomes. Thus the findings of the review, while shedding some light on the outcomes associated with participation in after-school programs, do not yield conclusive causal evidence.

Conclusions and Implications for School Counselors

Based on the above discussion, the following conclusions may be made regarding how school counselors can play a vital role in contributing to the effectiveness of after-school programs in improving student achievement.

1) Research on achievement motivation has long supported the important role that social and emotional factors play as enabling variables in academic achievement (Bleuer, 1987). Since this is the area in which positive outcomes from participation in after-school programs have been most clearly documented and it is an area in which school counselors have a high level of expertise, it would be beneficial for the administrators of after-school programs to involve school counselors both in program design and as ongoing consultants.
2) The "dosage" effects suggest that after-school programs should be an integral part of the school's academic and student development program so that students can readily and frequently participate in them. After-school programs provide an ideal setting for the integration of regular school counseling services (group guidance, personal counseling, study skills training) without adding to the already overloaded school counselor's responsibilities.

In summary, if a formal collaboration can be established between after-school programs and the school counseling program, school counselors can provide services that can significantly increase the probability that after-school programs will result in improved student achievement.

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